

Will Sand, Wenatchee, talks about his experiences in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Florida

New Orleans still had a dusk-to-dawn curfew when Wenatchee's Will Sand was working to put plastic tarps on homes in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. In fact, just about all the homes Will and his WCC crewmates worked on in the Crescent City were abandoned.

"It's like a ghost town," Will said during a phone interview in late January. "It doesn't make any difference where you park – on the side or in the middle of the street – there's just nobody here. We go from home to home and put on tarps. I've probably only seen one homeowner."

Will worked for 30 days providing relief for Hurricane Rita and another 30 days helping people battered by Hurricane Katrina. He worked in east Texas removing trees threatening homes and people. In Florida, he and his crewmates put tarps on about 500 roofs, averaging three to four homes a day.

In the coastal community of Pass Christian, Miss., Will said flooding from Hurricane Katrina was particularly devastating. Water picked up everything that would float and left all the debris in big piles.

"I saw boats and cars in trees, big barges that floated up on the shore," he said.

Aside from millions of shards of glass and jagged, nail-filled pieces of lumber, the flood also left another legacy in New Orleans and Pass Christian: black mold. The mold causes flu-like symptoms and anyone removing debris from a flood damaged home needs to wear heavy gloves and boots as well as a respirator.

It makes for hot work in the balmy Gulf Coast.

Yet, Will noted, Southern hospitality was alive and well, even in the midst of all the destruction. Many homeowners in Mississippi would give his WCC crews food and express their gratitude for the help. At first, he said, many storm survivors were skeptical that young men and women would come from so far away to help them – especially for free.

Due to all the glass, twisted metal, household chemicals and other threats, Will was part of an effort to organize a drive to get boots to people who had lost everything in the storm. A Washington company donated work boots to local residents so they, too, could help with the clean up efforts.

Will said, to keep their spirits up, he and his three crewmates developed an insider humor, telling jokes

to one another and keeping smiles and laughter going. On one Sunday, his crew dressed up in 1970s-style clothes and went bowling.

“I know now that I have the ability to work long hours for days on end. I’ve seen what helping people is all about and I want to continue to be there for people in need,” he said.

He hopes to combine his experience in WCC with his two years in the Navy as a welder and return to school. Will wants to attend the Divers Institute of Technology in Seattle where he’ll train to be an underwater welder with the aim of working for a salvage company.